

Conservation Buffers

photo: NRCS Oklahoma

Buffers – Good for Conservation, Good for the Environment

Agriculture is in the crosshairs when it comes to environmental matters. Our nation is facing critical water quality challenges – too much nitrogen and phosphorous in some streams and lakes, and not enough oxygen in the Gulf of Mexico and other water bodies. Frequently, agriculture is blamed as a major culprit. But amid the gloom and doom, there's also some good news out there: CONSERVATION BUFFERS

What are Conservation Buffers?

Conservation Buffers are small areas or strips of land in permanent vegetation designed to intercept pollutants and manage other environmental concerns. Buffers include: riparian buffers, filter strips, grassed waterways, shelter belts, windbreaks, living snow fences, contour grass strips, cross-wind trap strips, shallow water areas for wildlife, field borders, alley cropping, herbaceous wind barriers, and vegetative barriers.

Strategically placed buffer strips in the agricultural landscape can effectively mitigate the movement of sediment, nutrients, and pesticides within farm fields and from farm fields. When coupled with other management techniques such as upland treatments, including crop residue management, nutrient management, integrated pest management, winter cover crops, and other practices and technologies, buffer strips should allow farmers to

achieve a measure of economic and environmental sustainability in their operations. Buffer strips can also enhance wildlife habitat and protect bio-diversity.

Benefits of Buffers

- ☒ Slow water runoff
- ☒ Trap sediment
- ☒ Enhance infiltration
- ☒ Trap fertilizers, pesticides, pathogens, and heavy metals
- ☒ Trap snow
- ☒ Cut down on blowing soil in areas with strong winds
- ☒ Protect livestock and wildlife from harsh weather
- ☒ Protect buildings from wind damage
- ☒ Reduce noise and odor
- ☒ They are a source of food, nesting cover, and shelter for many wildlife species
- ☒ Provide corridors that enable wildlife to move safely from one habitat to another
- ☒ Help stabilize streams and reduce water temperature
- ☒ Offer a setback distance for agricultural chemical use from water sources

Like the trim on a house makes the house look better, well-planned conservation buffers improve the appearance of a farm or ranch. If used as a part of a comprehensive conservation system, buffers will make good use of areas that often should not be cropped.

If properly installed and maintained, they have the capacity to:

- ♦ Remove up to 50 percent or more nutrients and pesticides
- ♦ Remove up to 60 percent or more of certain pathogens
- ♦ Remove up to 75 percent or more of sediment

Buffers Belong in Conservation

The permanent strips of vegetation work for you and your environment. They protect soil and water and make economic sense.

Conservation buffers work economically because of financial incentives available through USDA Conservation Program – the continuous Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) signup, Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP), Wildlife Habitat Incentives Program (WHIP), general CRP, Wetlands Reserve Program (WRP), and Stewardship Incentives Program (SIP).

Buffers Do Not Represent New Technology

Their benefits have been known for years. The 1996 Farm Bill revived the buffer concept and continues to provide the enticement to establish them. The Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) is spearheading a drive to get more buffers in place.

To help you evaluate how buffers might benefit your land, here are brief descriptions of the most

popular types and their primary purpose:

Filter Strips

Strips of grass used to intercept or trap field sediment, organic, pesticides and other pollutants before they reach water bodies.

Riparian Buffers

Streamside plantings of trees, shrubs, and grasses that intercept contaminants from surface and ground water.

Contour Grass Strips

Narrow bands of perennial vegetation established across the slope of a crop field and alternated down the slope with crop strips.

Grassed Waterways

Strips of grass seeded in areas of cropland where water concentrates or flows off a field – prevents gully erosion.

Shelterbelts/Field Windbreaks

Rows of trees or other plants used to reduce wind erosion, protect young crops, and shelter livestock and wildlife.

For More Information on Buffers

Contact your local Natural Resources Conservation Service office, or check out these websites:

www.nhq.nrcs.usda.gov/CCS/Buffers.html or
www.buffercouncil.org



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